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THE FLATHEAD INDIANS OF MONTANA

BY CHAS. M. TOWNSEND

Flathead Indian
Fishing Practices

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men to be cared for, and there had to be a small but effective guard for the elderly.

This homeguard of all three bands centered around Darby, hunting and fishing the indigenous faunas. Winter drove the deer family down from the hills, and sometimes all went well. Yet informants seem to think that the eastward bison expedition was indulged in for a definite comfort rather than for a luxury standard of living. The poor homeguard often went hungry. Magpies and the flight of crows were watched carefully to see if they would reveal a carcass left by a predatory beast. No one ate the leavings of the mountain lion out of preference, but sometimes the deer hunters failed.

The great winter enemy in the valleys was hunger. The Blackfoot were too busy hunting the plains bison themselves. Spring was anxiously awaited, for around the equinox the scouts of friends and relatives were expected, the parfleches of the hunters opened, and the friendly Shahaptian Nez Percé trading expedition bringing baskets full of delicacies was awaited.

FISHING

The foregoing discussion confirms the Plains impression of Flathead culture. The fact that fish played an important part in their diet prevents the student from laying too much stress on this Plains aspect. While the Flathead could not subsist on their fishing industry, they did take this occupation seriously, which allies them to the margins of the coast. A point of considerable importance must be taken from their legends and myths. In these Coyote and other heroes are often described as fishing for salmon and rarely as hunting bison.

Local fishing knew no sexual division of labor. Men, women, and children took the trout and such fish as breed locally. Such fishing was not seasonal but was a continuous day-by-day occupation.

Flatheads used six methods of taking fish: (1) by hook-and-line, (2) by deadfall traps, (3) by nooses, (4) by harpoons, (5) by baited lines left in ice holes, and (6) by rather elaborate weirs and somewhat simple dams. All informants say that they knew that other people used nets but that they never did. The first five were reserved to individual endeavor. Only the last was a real economic communal pursuit.

The earliest fish hook might have been a simple barbed bone affair, but only the vaguest memory of it survives. The commonest was one carved from hawthorn with a thorn lashed thereto for a barb. This was baited with a grasshopper, grub, or piece of fresh meat. Sometimes the hook was

dispensed with, the line merely tied to the bait for the fish to swallow. The fish line was a rather fine length of line made of twisted horse hair.

The fish deadfall was quite simple, its size depending on the variety of fish sought and the size of the pool. This was only used in quiet waters lest the dead fish float away. The fishermen did not stay by the trap continuously. The instrument was fashioned in this manner. A substantial stick averaging about three feet long was procured. This was lodged against a pair of stones on the bank or in shallow water. The water end of the stick was weighted with a stone or piece of log. A prop was then set as delicately as possible in the water to raise and support the weighted beam. Occasionally in faster water two sticks were crossed for this support. A piece of bait was then tied to the prop by a horse hair string, just long enough so that the head of the fish seizing it would come under the weight. A tug at the bait would release the prop so that the weight would fall on the fish, and often enough, kill it.

In good streams and lakes where the fish were very plentiful a noose and line sufficed. The procedure was very simple, especially during spawning season. The wary fisherman would gaze into a school, await his opportunity, and deftly slip the noose over the fish he wanted.

In the old days the Flathead consistently speared fish with harpoons. I have not been able to procure one of these, so must rely on verbal description which seems to identify them with the three-pronged types described by Spinden for the Nez Percé.⁵

Fishing through the ice was an important food practice in winter. Many holes were cut in the ice, and before evening the fisherman would place in each a horse hair line with baited hook, securing each line to a stone or branch. These he would forget until morning when he once more visited his ice holes, gathered the catch, and baited the hooks once more.

While, as mentioned, the above fishing methods had no sexual division of labor and were not seasonal, the fishing by weirs was distinctly a male occupation and, when practiced for salmon, was seasonal. While weir fishing was used in such homeland streams as were sufficiently well-stocked, it was unusual. In the following discussion we might almost keep the salmon exclusively in mind.

The Flathead appreciated the great Northwest food fish, salmon, as much as any group west of the continental divide. They were only unfortunate in the scarcity of this natural resource. The only river cutting through the Bitter Root Mountains is the Clark's Fork of the Columbia

⁵ Spinden, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

set all the way across the stream, but save for the two end ones, always were of two sticks. The distance between these crotches varied, but seldom exceeded five feet. As some men completed the crotch setting, others were placing quite heavy poles in the forks and lashing them tight with rope. This was to weight the framework down in order to make it sound and secure.

The framework completed, the men then laid upon the upstream side of these slanting poles a series of coarse mats which they made of withes, preferably of willow. These were then made fast by hair twine. Now came the infixing of the "bags." These were fish traps from two to three feet in diameter and as much as five feet long, conical in shape, and woven from withes similar to the above. The hoop end was, of course, pointed upstream, while the closed end was downstream. Ordinarily weirs had but one such trap, though wider streams might have more. Upon being questioned why the salmon did not swim out of such simple traps informants reply that they never did. They depended upon the fish's desire to go downstream and the set of the current to keep him where they wanted him.

The weir, conceived of as production capital, was the result of group effort, so the fish, regarded as consumption goods, were community property. The catch once taken ashore was gathered into a large pile under the chief's supervision. Bearers would then proceed from lodge to lodge around the circle while the chief counted aloud the number of each lodge. As the chief counted, a fish was laid before each lodge. It was considered a good day's work if the bearers made the rounds of a fair-sized camp as many as four times.

The salmon deposited at the lodge door, the men's work was over. The women roasted some fish for immediate consumption, but the Salish prized salmon pemmican and pounded as much as they could for winter use with the same equipment described for pulverized bison.

FIRE MAKING

Since foods were not usually eaten raw, the methods of treating fire must be discussed.

The Salish tried not to let the camp fire die during the night. It was an arduous task rekindling it should this happen. Normally a large piece of wood was placed atop the fire just before going to sleep, and the side banked up with soil. In the morning a fair amount of blowing and the application of twigs would bring the fire back to a blaze in time to cook breakfast. If the fire had been allowed carelessly to burn out, a woman was sent to a neighbor's lodge to borrow a coal or a blazing stick.